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Synergizing Schools and Parents in Implementing the Nine Pillars of Character-Based Holistic Education to Enhance Students' Moral and Social Competence

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Abstract: This study examines the collaborative roles of schools and parents in implementing the Nine Pillars of Character-Based Holistic Education to enhance young children's moral and social competence. Conducted at a PAUD institution in West Surabaya, this qualitative case study involved 6 teachers and 10 parents purposively selected. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observations and analyzed using an interactive model. The findings show that character education is implemented through five key practices: integration of values in lesson plans, habituation activities (e.g., greeting, sharing), role modeling, school–parent communication, and cooperative play. Empirically, children demonstrated improvements in prosocial behavior, including increased sharing, better emotional control, and more respectful interactions. However, several challenges emerged, including limited teacher understanding of holistic approaches, inadequate facilities, inconsistent parental involvement, and the influence of digital media. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of the Nine Pillars approach depends on consistent implementation across school and home contexts. This study highlights that school–parent collaboration functions as a key mechanism in translating character education into observable moral and social competencies in early childhood.
Keywords: early childhood education, holistic education, character education, moral competence, social competence

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INTRODUCTION

Education plays a highly strategic role in shaping the character and personality of the nation's future generations. Its purpose is to enhance intellectual abilities and develop moral and social competencies, which serve as the primary foundation of social life. According to Ki Hajar Dewantara, education should encompass three essential elements—creativity, feeling, and will—which together form a complete personality (Dewantara, 1961). In this regard, a holistic, character-based educational approach is highly relevant to implement.

Early childhood development and education represent a strategic investment in improving the quality of human resources. Consequently, early childhood education institutions play a key role in supporting children's growth and development from an early age. Empowerment initiatives within early childhood education also accompany efforts to provide educational services. (Alfredo Bautista & Rebecca Bull, 2016).

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Character-based holistic education emphasizes the comprehensive development of individuals, including intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. This approach seeks to produce students who excel academically and demonstrate high moral integrity and strong social skills. One of the supporting concepts of this approach is integrating character values into the learning process. In this context, education grounded in the Nine Pillars of Character provides a solid foundation for developing students' moral and social competence.

Previous studies have extensively discussed character education in early childhood, with a particular focus on the internalization of values through curriculum integration, teacher modeling, and classroom-based activities. (Bariroh et al., 2023; Kusmiyati, 2024). Other studies have also highlighted the importance of parental involvement and social interaction in shaping children's moral development.

However, these studies tend to examine these elements in a fragmented manner, either focusing on school-based practices or parental roles separately, without clearly explaining how collaborative mechanisms between schools and families operate in practice. In addition, limited attention has been given to how the Nine Pillars of Character are implemented holistically in real learning contexts and how such implementation translates into observable moral and social behaviors in children.

In Indonesia, the need for character education has become increasingly urgent in light of the challenges faced by modern society. One major challenge is the negative influence of globalization, which often erodes local values and replaces them with foreign cultures that are not always aligned with local wisdom. This is compounded by cases of moral degradation, including rising rates of violence, intolerance, and other deviant behaviors, all of which indicate a character crisis among younger generations.

Character is an aspect of personality that fosters accountability, responsibility in the face of challenges, and self-control, as outlined in the Nine Pillars of Character. Therefore, character building must begin in early childhood, a golden period encompassing moral, cognitive, motor, social, emotional, and language development. (Fajarianto et al., 2023).

The Indonesian government has prioritized character education within the national education system. This commitment is reflected in the curriculum, which explicitly integrates character values across all subjects. However, the implementation of character education still faces several challenges, such as teachers' limited understanding of the concept and inadequate supporting facilities and infrastructure. (Sofyan Mustoip et al., 2023). For this reason, systematic and sustainable efforts are required to ensure the effective implementation of character education at all levels.

Character-based holistic education is a comprehensive approach that integrates the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of learning to develop well-rounded individuals with moral integrity and social competence. This approach is strongly rooted in educational and developmental psychology theories. One of the key references is Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. (Walrath, 2011; Yılmaz et al., 2019). According to Kohlberg (1981), moral development progresses through three main stages: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. Character education, designed with a reflective and contextual approach, is believed to help students reach higher stages of moral development through meaningful learning experiences.

Vygotsky's constructivist learning theory also supports a holistic educational approach, emphasizing the importance of social interaction and cultural mediation in the learning process. In character education, interactions with peers and educators serve as a medium for internalizing values, enabling students to develop an understanding of social norms through real-life, collaborative experiences. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is particularly relevant to providing moral scaffolding through educators' active role. (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

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Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory highlights that children's development is influenced by multiple interconnected environments, particularly family and school. This indicates that effective character education requires not only strong school-based instruction but also consistent reinforcement within the family context. Nevertheless, several implementation challenges remain, including educators' limited understanding of holistic approaches, inadequate integration of values into curricula, and insufficient collaboration among families and schools.

Therefore, the research gap of this study lies in the lack of empirical evidence on how school–parent collaboration functions as an integrated mechanism for implementing the Nine Pillars of Character in early childhood education settings. This study addresses this gap by examining the collaborative practices between schools and parents, the concrete strategies used to integrate the Nine Pillars of Character, and the contextual challenges encountered during implementation.

The novelty of this study lies in three aspects: (1) providing an integrated analysis of school–parent collaboration rather than treating them as separate actors, (2) examining the operationalization of the Nine Pillars of Character in real classroom and home contexts, and (3) offering empirical insights into the challenges and dynamics of implementing holistic character education in early childhood settings. Based on this, the study explores how the Nine Pillars of Character can be effectively implemented in early childhood education to enhance students' moral and social competence.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study method. A qualitative approach enables researchers to capture social situations in their natural context, including historical dimensions, behavioral patterns, interactions, and the lived experiences of individuals or groups. (Flick, U, 2014). The case study method, in particular, was chosen because it allows for an in-depth and detailed exploration of a specific phenomenon with clear contextual boundaries of time and place, (Bergin T, 2018; Mohajan, H. K., 2018). In this study, the phenomenon under investigation was the implementation of character-based holistic education—represented by the Nine Pillars—to foster students' moral and social competencies.

As a branch of qualitative inquiry, case studies emphasize the detailed exploration of activities and events, providing opportunities for researchers to examine each occurrence, process, and transformation over time (Creswell, J. W., 2014). This requires the researcher to possess strong theoretical knowledge and deep insight into holistic character-based education and its developmental strategies. Such preparation is essential for eliciting meaningful data from the field, particularly when engaging with participants through interviews and analyzing how social contexts shape value internalization.

The study was conducted in an early childhood education (PAUD) institution in West Surabaya City. The participants consisted of 6 teachers and 10 parents who were directly involved in implementing and supporting character-based education. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the criteria of (1) actively engaging in teaching or parenting practices related to the Nine Pillars of Character, and (2) having at least one year of experience in the institution.

Data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. (Julie Levashina et al., 2013; Rebecca K Frels & Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face, each lasting approximately 30–60 minutes, allowing flexibility to probe participants' experiences related to value internalization. Secondary data were drawn from curriculum documents, institutional policies, and classroom documentation.

In addition to interviews, participatory observations were conducted over four weeks during regular classroom activities and daily routines, including greeting sessions, cooperative

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play, and role-based tasks. These observations focused on interactions between teachers, children, and peers, as well as the practical implementation of the Nine Pillars of Character in real learning situations. Interview guidelines, observation protocols, field notes, and recording devices were employed to ensure consistency while capturing contextual and spontaneous data.

The data analysis process followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model. In the data reduction stage, interview transcripts and observation notes were systematically coded using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns such as cooperation, responsibility, and respect (Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J., 2014). These codes were then grouped into broader categories representing moral and social competencies. In the data display stage, the categorized data were organized into matrices and narrative descriptions to compare perspectives between teachers and parents and to identify relationships between educational practices and children's behaviors. During the conclusion-drawing and verification stage, emerging findings were continuously compared across data sources. Patterns were refined through iterative analysis until consistent interpretations were achieved. To ensure trustworthiness, this study employed triangulation of data sources (teachers, parents, and documents), triangulation of methods (interviews and observations), and prolonged engagement in the field. Member checking was also conducted by confirming key findings with selected participants to ensure the accuracy of interpretations.

This systematic analysis ultimately provided a nuanced understanding of how the Nine Pillars of Character were implemented in early childhood education. By linking educators' strategies, children's behaviors, and parental involvement, the study produced a holistic description of the processes and challenges of character-based education in practice. (Pathak Vibha., Jena Bijayani., & Kalra Sanjay, 2013; Yilmaz K, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Concept of Holistic Character-Based Education and the Values of the Nine Pillars of Character

Education plays a fundamental role in improving the quality of human resources and advancing societal welfare. Beyond the development of cognitive abilities such as critical thinking and problem-solving, education also contributes to the formation of individuals' character and overall personal development (Abdul Khobir et al., 2021). Not only that, but education is also important for developing competent human resources; there is much to learn, namely the ability to think critically, solve problems, and improve one's quality.

Holistic education is an educational concept that enhances and develops children's potential across moral, physical, emotional, social, creative, communication, and cognitive domains. Thus, holistic education can help develop individual potential by fostering an active, creative, humanistic, environmentally based, and enjoyable learning process.

Humans are social beings who need each other and the surrounding environment; holistic education must also include cognitive, affective, and psychomotor elements. The goal of holistic education is to help develop individual potential to create an active, creative, humanistic learning process based on the environment, so that holistic education in the learning process is aimed at enabling students to learn to be themselves and is closely related to learning interests and motivation (Riza Mi'rotul Rohmah et al., 2023).

According to the opinion Sutarman et al. (2022)Holistically, education is a learning process that enables students to become themselves, thereby fostering psychological freedom, decision-making, social skills, and character and emotional development. Thus, holistic education aims to align closely with individual learning interests and motivations. Character-based holistic education is education that develops all dimensions of human beings, not only academic aspects but also physical, emotional, creative and other aspects of intelligence in a holistic and balanced manner by the development of the nine pillars of character (love for God and all His creations, discipline and independence, responsibility, honesty, trustworthiness and

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diplomacy, respect and courtesy, compassion, caring, and cooperation). Character education aims to improve the quality of educational implementation and outcomes, leading to the achievement of character formation or noble morals for students in a complete, integrated, and balanced manner, aligned with competency standards. (Endang Kartikowati, 2020).

However, field findings reveal that educators do not always articulate holistic education using formal theoretical terminology. As one teacher explained, *"We do not use the term holistic explicitly, but in practice we teach children to pray, share, and take responsibility every day"* (Teacher 2). This suggests that holistic character-based education is often enacted implicitly as a pedagogical practice rather than as a consciously structured conceptual framework.

Observational data further support this finding. During daily routines, children were consistently observed greeting teachers and peers with a handshake, reflecting the values of respect and courtesy. In another instance, a child who unintentionally took a peer's toy was guided by the teacher to return it and apologize, demonstrating the practical enactment of honesty and responsibility. These examples indicate that the Nine Pillars of Character are not merely taught as abstract concepts but are embedded in everyday interactions and social practices.

Rather than indicating a simple gap between theory and practice, these findings suggest that character values are internalized through habituation and guided social interaction. This pattern highlights the role of lived experience and routine participation in shaping children's character development, where values are constructed and reinforced through continuous engagement in meaningful social contexts. Based on the explanation above, it is also supported regarding the application of the nine pillars of character to early childhood education:

Table 1. Implementation of the Nine Pillars of Character

No	Nine Pillars of Character	Implementation in Daily Activities
1	Religious	• From an early age, children are taught to begin every activity with prayer. • Children are taught about the cleanliness of places of worship. • Cultivate the habit of greeting, smiling, and saying hello to everyone.
2	Honest	• Children are taught to admit mistakes to develop a sense of responsibility. • From an early age, children are accustomed to returning items they find that do not belong to them.
3	Tolerance	• At an early age, children are taught the importance of respecting friends of different religions and backgrounds. • Giving opportunities to other friends who have different religious beliefs. • Being able to respect differences of opinion during discussions.
4	Discipline	• Children are taught discipline by arriving at school on time. • Wearing school uniforms according to school regulations. • Submitting assignments by the deadline.
5	Hard work	• Not giving up easily when learning difficult material. • Helping parents with work at home.
6	Creative	• Children are taught to be able to make creative works from used materials. • Children are taught to generate new ideas during class activities.
7	Independent	• From an early age, children are trained to create their own study schedules. • Children can complete assignments in class and do not rely on peers for help.
8	Democratic	• Children are trained to respect differences of opinion among their

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		peers during discussions. • Children are also taught to deliberate together before making decisions.
9	Responsible	• Children are also encouraged to admit their mistakes when they commit a violation. • Children are taught to have a sense of responsibility for themselves, both at home and at school.

Based on the table, it can be concluded that implementing the nine pillars of character in early childhood is critical for engaging in daily activities. This aims to lay a strong foundation for children's personalities, build positive habits, teach social responsibility, and prepare children to be part of a generation with good character and morals.

The implementation of character-based holistic education is necessary because, in the current era of globalization and digitalization, every child must be fortified with strong character and morals, in the hope that they will not be easily influenced by rapidly unfolding social changes due to the invasion of foreign culture. Character education is an individual's psychosocial dimension that can form gradually and over the long term through interactions with the environment, both objectively and subjectively. (Nelly Ivva Ruhaina et al., 2019).

The holistic character-based education model aims to build a complete, well-rounded character in students and equip them to face the challenges of a dynamic life. Character education for early childhood has a higher meaning than moral education because it is not only related to the issue of right or wrong, but also how to instill habits about good things so that students can understand (cognitive) about what is right and wrong, can feel (affective) good values and are used to doing them (psychomotor) (Narendradewi Kusumastuti, 2020).

According to Prem Lal Joshi (2025)Holistically character-based education in early childhood education is delivered through fun, inspiring learning experiences. These universal noble values can help children develop character, love peace, be responsible and honest, and have a range of other good morals.

Early childhood education is a preparatory period for formal schooling; thus, character education is important to be taught from an early age. The successful implementation of character education, which will later be applied in daily behavior, is: patience, honesty, awareness, sincerity, independence, caring, freedom, thoroughness, respect for rights and obligations, commitment, and compliance with regulations.

Character education in early childhood has greater significance than moral education because it is not only concerned with major issues or wrongdoing but also instills good habits from an early age. This way, children understand cognitively, experience good values, and practice them psychomotorically and affectively. The Indonesia Heritage Foundation (IHF) was founded in 2000 by Ratna Megawangi, Ph.D., as a pioneer of holistic, character-based education [40]. Implementing these nine pillars of character can build a foundation for individuals to develop character, intelligence, and creativity. This learning model is expected to develop students' noble character, which is a habit of the mind, a habit of the heart, and a habit of the hands.

The implementation of character-based holistic education aims to produce individuals who are knowledgeable and capable, possess the values and character traits essential for contributing positively to society, and embody principles such as wisdom, integrity, and holistic development. In early childhood character development, holistic education is considered effective in guiding and shaping children's character toward a more focused future. Character-based holistic education, applying the nine pillars of values, can guide children in both academic and skills aspects in a comprehensive and integrated manner. Based on the data presented above, it can be concluded that character-based holistic education is an educational approach that positions early childhood development as the development of individuals with character. This emphasizes not only knowledge (cognitive) but also fosters attitudes (affective)

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and skills (psychomotor). Thus, holistic education views children as individuals in their golden age who need proper guidance and will eventually grow optimally physically, emotionally, socially, morally, and spiritually.

Applying the nine pillars of character in holistic early childhood education is crucial because early childhood is the foundation of character, when moral, social, and religious values are more easily instilled through habituation and positive reinforcement. Therefore, applying these nine pillars of character shapes the next generation to be intellectually intelligent, morally noble, mentally resilient, and caring for others.

2. Integration of Character Values in Early Childhood Education Learning

Moral development constitutes a central aspect of early childhood education, as it forms the foundation for children's behavior and social interaction. The importance of moral education has been increasingly emphasized in response to concerns about the decline in students' moral values in contemporary educational contexts. (Kamrani Buseri, 2017). In this regard, teachers play a critical role as facilitators and role models in shaping children's character.

Character can be understood as an internalized system of values that guides individuals' thinking and behavior in everyday life. It develops through continuous reinforcement and meaningful experiences, particularly when supported by structured character education practices. According to Lasiyati Yuswo Yani & Tria Wahyuningrum (2022)Good character consists of three interconnected components: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, which together enable children not only to understand values but also to care about and practice them.

However, contemporary educational practices often prioritize cognitive achievement and global competitiveness, which may unintentionally marginalize moral and character development. (Annisa Dwi Hamdani et al., 2022). This condition highlights the need to reposition education as a space for integrating both cognitive and moral dimensions in a balanced manner.

Field data show that the integration of character values occurs through both structured (programmed) activities and continuous habituation practices. Teachers reported that character values are embedded in lesson planning, yet more strongly reinforced through repetitive daily routines. One teacher stated: *"We repeat the same habits every day, like saying thank you, helping friends, and cleaning up toys. Over time, children do it automatically."* (Teacher 4). This indicates that repetition and consistency function as key mechanisms in value internalization.

Observations further revealed that character values are enacted through real-time social interactions rather than abstract instruction. During cooperative play, children were encouraged to take turns and negotiate roles. In one instance, two children argued over a toy, and the teacher facilitated a discussion, prompting them to share and agree on turns. This interaction reflects the development of democratic, cooperative, and problem-solving values within authentic social contexts.

The role of parents also emerges as a critical reinforcing factor. One parent noted: *"At home, we follow what the school teaches. If the child forgets to say sorry or thank you, we remind them the same way the teacher does."* (Parent 3). This finding suggests that the effectiveness of character education depends on consistency across learning environments, particularly between school and home. Character education implemented from an early age aims to shape children's moral identity and support the development of socially responsible behavior across contexts, including family, school, and community environments.

Field data show that the integration of character values occurs through both programmed and habituation activities. Teachers reported that character values are embedded in daily lesson plans, but more significantly reinforced through repeated routines. One teacher stated: "*We repeat the same habits every day, like saying thank you, helping friends, and cleaning up toys. Over time, children do it automatically."* (Teacher 4).

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Observations revealed that during cooperative play activities, children were encouraged to take turns and negotiate roles. In one instance, two children argued over a toy, and the teacher facilitated a discussion, prompting them to share and agree on turns. This reflects the development of democratic and cooperative values in real-time interactions.

Parents also play a reinforcing role. One parent noted: *"At home, we follow what the school teaches. If the child forgets to say sorry or thank you, we remind them the same way the teacher does."* (Parent 3). These findings indicate that integration is not limited to classroom instruction but extends into consistent reinforcement across home and school environments. According to Syahria Anggita Sakti et al. (2024), character education serves three main functions: (1) developing students' potential to think and act ethically in alignment with societal values, (2) strengthening the collaborative role of families, schools, and communities, and (3) filtering external cultural influences that may conflict with local moral values.

Early childhood represents a critical developmental period, as the brain undergoes rapid growth and is highly responsive to environmental stimulation. (Martsiswati & Suryono, 2014; Pramudyani & Sugito, 2014; Ujang Syarif Hidayat, 2021). Therefore, integrating character values at this stage is essential to support children's holistic development across moral, social-emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. The integration of character values can be implemented through two complementary approaches: structured (programmed) activities and habituation-based activities. (Uswatun Hasanah & Much Deiniatur, 2018). Programmed activities involve intentional instructional design using play-based methods, media, and interactive learning strategies. In contrast, habituation activities are carried out through routine practices, role modeling, and spontaneous interactions within the school environment and are supported by families and communities.

Based on the findings, the integration of character values cannot be viewed as a standalone instructional component but rather as a continuous and contextually embedded process. Teachers serve as primary role models, while parents and the broader environment act as reinforcing agents that sustain the internalization of values beyond the classroom. Furthermore, effective integration requires developmentally appropriate and creative strategies, such as play, storytelling, and guided discussions rooted in real-life situations.

Ultimately, the integration of character values in early childhood education aims to foster well-rounded individuals capable of respectful interaction, tolerance, cooperation, and responsible behavior, while also providing opportunities for children to explore their creativity and develop their potential through meaningful, contextual learning experiences.

3. Learning Environment Support as a Process of Internalizing Character Values in Early Childhood

Education extends beyond the development of cognitive abilities and skills, encompassing the formation of ethical values and moral behavior through a supportive learning environment. A balanced educational process requires integrating the physical, social, and emotional dimensions of the environment that collectively influence children's development. (Ridnawati, 2020).

Empirical findings show that a supportive learning environment is multidimensional, consisting of physical, relational, and emotional elements that interact to shape children's behavior. Physically, classrooms were arranged with visual representations of character values, such as posters on honesty and cooperation, which were not merely decorative but actively referenced by teachers during classroom interactions.

Socially, teachers consistently modeled expected behaviors through responsive and reflective actions. For instance, when a child made a mistake, the teacher responded calmly and used the situation as a learning opportunity rather than imposing punishment. This aligns with one teacher's statement: "Children learn more from how we respond than from what we say"

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(Teacher 1). This indicates that modeling functions as a primary mechanism for value transmission.

Emotionally, children were observed to experience a sense of safety and acceptance that encouraged participation and self-expression. In one case, a child who initially refused to participate was gently supported without coercion and eventually engaged after observing peers. This suggests that emotional security plays a crucial role in facilitating the internalization process.

These findings indicate that the internalization of character values occurs through continuous interaction within a supportive environment rather than through direct instruction alone. Internalization can be understood as an active process in which children interpret, construct meaning, and gradually adopt values based on what they observe, hear, and experience. (Atikah Syamsi & Siti Dewi Maharani, 2018).

Learning support that is implemented as a process of internalizing character values includes three forms of effective activities, namely. (Novita Loka & Novita Sari, 2024): (a) routine habituation, which is an activity implemented by educators to accustom children to do good deeds in a programmed manner. For example, activities implemented include praying before studying, saying goodbye and shaking hands, washing hands before and after eating and so on; (b) spontaneous habituation is an activity carried out by educators to accustom children to do good deeds spontaneously such as giving gifts, giving punishments or advice; (c) exemplary habituation is giving examples of good behavior to children consistently so that children also carry out good behavior as exemplified.

As an educator, you have the power to instill the values of early childhood education in three ways during the internalization process. (Siti Najmah et al., 2025): (a) educators can be effective compassionate people, namely building self-confidence in them, making children understand what morals are with the ethical values taught; (b) educators can be role models, namely ethical people who show a high sense of responsibility both inside and outside the classroom; (c) educators can be ethical mentors, namely providing moral instruction and guidance through explanations, discussions, and providing corrective feedback. Internalizing character values in early childhood through role models and habits essentially involves all parties. The essence of internalization lies in unity with the school, family, and community. The 9 pillars of character need to be instilled as universal values that all religions, traditions, and cultures uphold, so they can serve as a unifying force for all members of society, regardless of their backgrounds. (Ni Luh Drajati Ekaningtyas & I Made Ardika Yasa, 2022).

The application of these values within the learning environment includes fostering gratitude, responsibility, honesty, respect, empathy, cooperation, confidence, leadership, humility, tolerance, and social harmony. However, field observations suggest that not all values are equally emphasized, with greater focus placed on socially observable behaviors such as respect, cooperation, and responsibility.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that a supportive learning environment plays a critical role in facilitating the internalization of character values, particularly when it is consistently implemented across multiple dimensions. A safe, responsive, and inclusive environment enables children not only to understand character values but also to experience and practice them in meaningful contexts.

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that internalization is largely driven by habituation and modeling, which may not always foster a deep, reflective understanding of values. Therefore, there is a need to complement environmental support with more explicit reflective and dialogic approaches to strengthen children's moral reasoning and awareness.

4. Challenges and Reflections on the Implementation of Holistic, Character-Based Education in Early Childhood Education

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While previous findings highlight the importance of a supportive learning environment for character development, implementing holistic character-based education is not without its challenges. Rather than assuming consistent success, it is necessary to critically examine the limitations and contextual constraints identified in the field.

Field findings reveal several concrete challenges in implementation. First, not all teachers demonstrate a comprehensive conceptual understanding of holistic character education, even though they attempt to apply it in practice. One teacher admitted: *"We apply it, but sometimes we are not sure whether it already covers all aspects of the Nine Pillars."* (Teacher 5). This indicates a gap between practical enactment and conceptual clarity, which may affect the consistency and depth of implementation.

Second, parental involvement remains uneven and situational rather than consistently integrated. While some parents actively reinforce values at home, others rely primarily on the school. As one parent noted: *"Honestly, sometimes we are busy, so we expect the school to handle most of it."* (Parent 7). This inconsistency suggests that character education is not yet fully supported as a shared responsibility across environments.

Third, the influence of digital media presents an emerging and complex challenge. Teachers observed that some children imitate inappropriate language or behaviors from online content, requiring additional guidance. This finding highlights that character development is increasingly shaped not only by immediate environments but also by broader digital exposure, which may not always align with intended educational values.

These challenges indicate that the implementation of holistic character education is influenced by multiple interacting factors, including teacher capacity, family engagement, and external socio-cultural dynamics, rather than being determined solely by curriculum design.

Early childhood represents a critical developmental stage characterized by rapid growth across cognitive, emotional, social, and moral domains, making it highly sensitive to environmental influences. In the context of the digital era, this sensitivity becomes more complex, as children are simultaneously exposed to both constructive and potentially conflicting value systems (Nia Kusmiyati, 2024). One of the main challenges of character education in the digital era is the influence of social media and online content. The paradigm shift in learning, which is increasingly tending to be done online, is also a challenge due to the lack of social and environmental interaction, which can reduce the opportunities for students to develop skills, social skills, and cooperation (Adam Wildan Alfikri, 2023).

Character-based holistic education aims to foster moral integrity and well-rounded personality development by integrating ethical values such as responsibility, cooperation, honesty, and empathy into children's daily experiences. However, the increasing dominance of digital media introduces risks such as reduced face-to-face interaction, dependency on online validation, and exposure to inappropriate content, which may challenge the effectiveness of traditional character education approaches (Malihah, 2015). Therefore, a critical reflection emerges: holistic character education must evolve to address not only traditional moral development but also the ethical challenges of the digital environment. This requires the integration of character education with digital literacy, ensuring that children are not only technologically competent but also ethically guided in navigating digital spaces (Tyas, E. H., Sunarto, S., & Naibaho, L., 2020; Yusri Fajri Annur et al., 2021).

Several reflective implications can be drawn from these findings. First, character education needs to be more explicitly integrated into curriculum design to ensure conceptual clarity and systematic implementation, rather than relying solely on implicit habituation practices. Second, technology should be positioned not merely as a challenge but as a potential medium for character development, for example, through educational digital content that promotes empathy, cooperation, and emotional intelligence. Third, stronger collaboration among educators, parents, and communities is essential to create consistency in value reinforcement across contexts.

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Overall, the findings suggest that while holistic character-based education has been implemented in practice, its effectiveness is contingent upon the alignment of multiple stakeholders and the ability to adapt to contemporary challenges. Therefore, sustained efforts are required to strengthen teacher capacity, enhance parental engagement, and develop adaptive strategies that respond to the complexities of the digital era.

CONCLUSION

Implementing holistic, character-based education through the Nine Pillars approach underscores the comprehensive development of early childhood moral and social competencies. This model integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions into learning activities, ensuring that children not only acquire knowledge but also internalize values, attitudes, and skills necessary for meaningful participation in social life. By applying the Nine Pillars of Character—responsibility, discipline, honesty, caring, cooperation, creativity, independence, courage, and respect—students are guided to build a strong moral foundation alongside adaptive and empathetic social skills. The findings of this study highlight that successful implementation requires active collaboration between schools and parents, supported by consistent role modeling, habituation, and cooperative practices across home and school settings. Such collaboration fosters a supportive educational ecosystem where character values are continuously reinforced in both formal and informal contexts. Strengthening teacher capacity and enhancing parental involvement emerge as central strategies for cultivating students' moral integrity and social responsibility. In this way, education transcends academic achievement and moves toward more holistic, meaningful, and sustainable goals in preparing a morally resilient and socially empathetic generation.

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